

The sharp lines between social groups that were characteristic of the *varna* system as it developed in India during the first millennium B.C.E. had their counterpart in the system of strongly patriarchal gender relations that arose at about the same time. Although the documentary evidence regarding relationships between men and women in early India is extremely fragmentary and often indirect, a variety of written sources are nonetheless suggested.

In this chapter, we look at three types of documentation that help us to grasp the character of gender relations in India during the classical period. First, we will examine a few songs from the *Therigatha*, a collection of more than 500 songs originally composed by Buddhist nuns (*theris*) who were contemporaries of the Buddha. Scholars think that the songs in the *Therigatha* were first put into writing in the 1st century B.C.E.

The second kind of evidence we consider comes from the *Laws of Manu*, an influential philosophical-legal treatise dating from the beginning of the Common Era. The anonymous authors of the *Laws of Manu* were *brahmans* whose purpose in writing the book was, in part, to outline prescribed modes of behavior. In the selections from the *Laws of Manu* that follow, the focus is on gender relations.

Next, we draw for the second time from a great epic, the *Mahabharata*, choosing one of its most popular episodes, "Savatri and the God of Death." For a fourth type of evidence, see the Visual Source at the end of the chapter. In what ways does the picture of gender relations that emerges from these sources mesh with broader Eurasian patterns? Was the Indian situation distinctive in any way?

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INDIAN GENDER CULTURE

I. SONGS COMPOSED BY BUDDHIST NUNS

Mutta

[So free am I, so gloriously free]

So free am I, so gloriously free,
Free from three petty things—
From mortar, from pestle and from my twisted lord,
Freed from rebirth and death I am,
And all that has held me down
Is hurled away.

Ubbiri

["O Ubbiri, who wails in the wood"]

"O Ubbiri, who wails in the wood
'O Jiva! Dear daughter!'
Return to your senses, in this charnel field
Innumerable daughters, once as full of life as Jiva,
Are burnt. Which of them do you mourn?"
The hidden arrow in my heart plucked out,
The dart lodged there, removed.
The anguish of my loss,
The grief that left me faint all gone,
The yearning stilled,
To the Buddha, the Dhamma [Moral Law], and the Sangha [Community of
Buddhists]
I turn, my heart now healed.

Sumangalamata

[A woman well set free! How free I am]

A woman well set free! How free I am,
How wonderfully free, from kitchen drudgery.
Free from the harsh grip of hunger,
And from empty cooking pots,
Free too of that unscrupulous man,
The weaver of sunshades.
Calm now, and serene I am,
All lust and hatred purged.
To the shade of the spreading trees I go
And contemplate my happiness.

Mettika

[Though I am weak and tired now]

Though I am weak and tired now,
And my youthful step long gone,

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I climb th
My cloak
I sit here
And over
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Of liberty
I've won,
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II. THE LAW

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III. SAVATRA

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Leaning on this staff,
 I climb the mountain peak.
 My cloak cast off, my bowl overturned,
 I sit here on this rock.
 And over my spirit blows
 The breath
 Of liberty
 I've won, I've won the triple gems [the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha]
 The Buddha's way is mine.

II. THE LAWS OF MANU

- In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, and when her lord is dead, to her sons; a woman must never be independent [Manu, V, 184].
- Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure (elsewhere), or devoid of good qualities, (yet) a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife [Manu, V, 154].
- A virtuous wife who after the death of her husband constantly remains chaste, reaches heaven, though she have no son, just like those chaste men [Manu, V, 160].
- But a woman who from a desire to have offspring violates her duty towards her dead husband, brings on herself disgrace in this world, and loses her place with her husband in heaven [Manu, V, 161].
- A wife, a son and a slave, these three are declared to have no property: the wealth which they earn is (acquired) for him to whom they belong [Manu, VIII, 416].
- (When creating them) Manu allotted to women (a love of their) bed, (of their) seat and (of) ornament, impure desires, wrath, dishonesty, malice, and bad conduct [Manu, IX, 17].
- In the sacred texts which refer to marriage the appointment (of widows) is nowhere mentioned, nor is the remarriage of widows prescribed in the rules concerning marriage [Manu, IX, 65].
- A man, aged thirty years, shall marry a maiden of twelve who pleases him, or a man of twenty-four a girl eight years of age; if the performance of his duties would otherwise be impeded, he must marry sooner [Manu, IX, 94].

III. SAVATRI AND THE GOD OF DEATH

Ashvapati, the virtuous king of Madras, grew old without offspring to continue his royal family. Desiring a son, Ashvapati took rigid vows and observed long fasts to accumulate merit. It is said that he offered 10,000 oblations to the goddess Savatri in hopes of having a son. After eighteen years of constant devotion, Ashvapati was granted his wish for an offspring even though the baby born was a girl.

The king rejoiced at his good fortune and named the child Savatri in honor of the goddess who gave him this joy to brighten his elder years.

Savatri was both a beautiful and an intelligent child. She was her father's delight and grew in wisdom and beauty as the years passed. As the age approached for Savatri to be given in marriage as custom demanded, no suitor came forward to

ask her father for her hand—so awed were all the princes by the beauty and intellect of this unusual maiden. Her father became concerned lest he not fulfill his duty as father and incur disgrace for his failure to provide a suitable husband for his daughter. At last, he instructed Savatri herself to lead a procession throughout the surrounding kingdoms and handpick a man suitable for her.

Savatri returned from her search and told her father that she had found the perfect man. Though he was poor and an ascetic of the woods, he was handsome, well educated, and of kind temperament. His name was Satyavan and he was actually a prince whose blind father had been displaced by an evil king. Ashvapati asked the venerable sage Narada whether Satyavan would be a suitable spouse for Savatri. Narada responded that there was no one in the world more worthy than Satyavan. However, Narada continued, Satyavan had one unavoidable flaw. He was fated to live a short life and would die exactly one year from that very day. Ashvapati then tried to dissuade Savatri from marrying Satyavan by telling her of the impending death of her loved one. Savatri held firm to her choice, and the king and Narada both gave their blessings to this seemingly ill-fated bond.

After the marriage procession had retreated from the forest hermitage of Savatri's new father-in-law, Dyumatsena, the bride removed her wedding sari and donned the ochre robe and bark garments of her ascetic family. As the days and weeks passed, Savatri busied herself by waiting upon the every need of her new family. She served her husband, Satyavan, cheerfully and skillfully. Satyavan responded with an even-tempered love which enhanced the bond of devotion between Savatri and himself. Yet the dark cloud of Narada's prophecy cast a shadow over this otherwise blissful life.

When the fateful time approached, Savatri began a fast to strengthen her wifely resolve as she kept nightly vigils while her husband slept. The day marked for the death of Satyavan began as any other day at the hermitage. Satyavan shouldered his axe and was about to set off to cut wood for the day's fires when Savatri stopped him to ask if she could go along saying, "I cannot bear to be separated from you today." Satyavan responded, "You've never come into the forest before and the paths are rough and the way very difficult. Besides, you've been fasting and are surely weak." Savatri persisted, and Satyavan finally agreed to take her along. Savatri went to her parents-in-law to get their permission saying she wanted to see the spring blossoms which now covered the forest. They too expressed concern over her health but finally relented out of consideration for her long period of gracious service to them.

Together Satyavan and Savatri entered the tangled woods enjoying the beauty of the flowers and animals which betoken spring in the forest. Coming to a fallen tree, Satyavan began chopping firewood. As he worked, he began to perspire heavily and to grow weak. Finally, he had to stop and lie down telling Savatri to wake him after a short nap. With dread in her heart, Savatri took Satyavan's head in her lap and kept a vigil knowing Satyavan's condition to be more serious than rest could assuage. In a short time, Savatri saw approaching a huge figure clad in red and carrying a small noose. Placing Satyavan's head upon the ground, Savatri arose and asked the stranger of his mission. The lord of death replied, "I am Yama and your husband's days are finished. I speak to you, a mortal, only because of your extreme merit. I have come personally instead of sending my emissaries because of your husband's righteous life."

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Yama woman. devotion husband law be given turned to again promised Yama and Savatri's sons to give

Yama that Savatri giving at promise for her life myself of Satyavan that the to life. laughed is freed its earth had fallen saying, '"

STUDY

1. What was the purpose of the marriage procession?
2. How did Savatri feel about her husband's death?
3. What was the significance of the spring blossoms?
4. Are there any other characters in the story?
5. To what does the story refer to in the end?

Without a further word, Yama then pulled Satyavan's soul out of his body with the small noose he was carrying. The lord of death then set off immediately for the realm of the dead in the south. Grief stricken and yet filled with wifely devotion, Savatri followed Yama at a distance. Hours passed yet hunger and weariness could not slow Savatri's footsteps. She persisted through thorny paths and rocky slopes to follow Yama and his precious burden. As Yama walked south he thought he heard a woman's anklets tingling on the path behind him. He turned around to see Savatri in the distance following without pause. He called out to her to return to Satyavan's body and to perform her wifely duties of cremating the dead. Savatri approached Yama and responded, "It is said that those who walk seven steps together are friends. Certainly we have traveled farther than that together. Why should I return to a dead body when you possess the soul of my husband?"

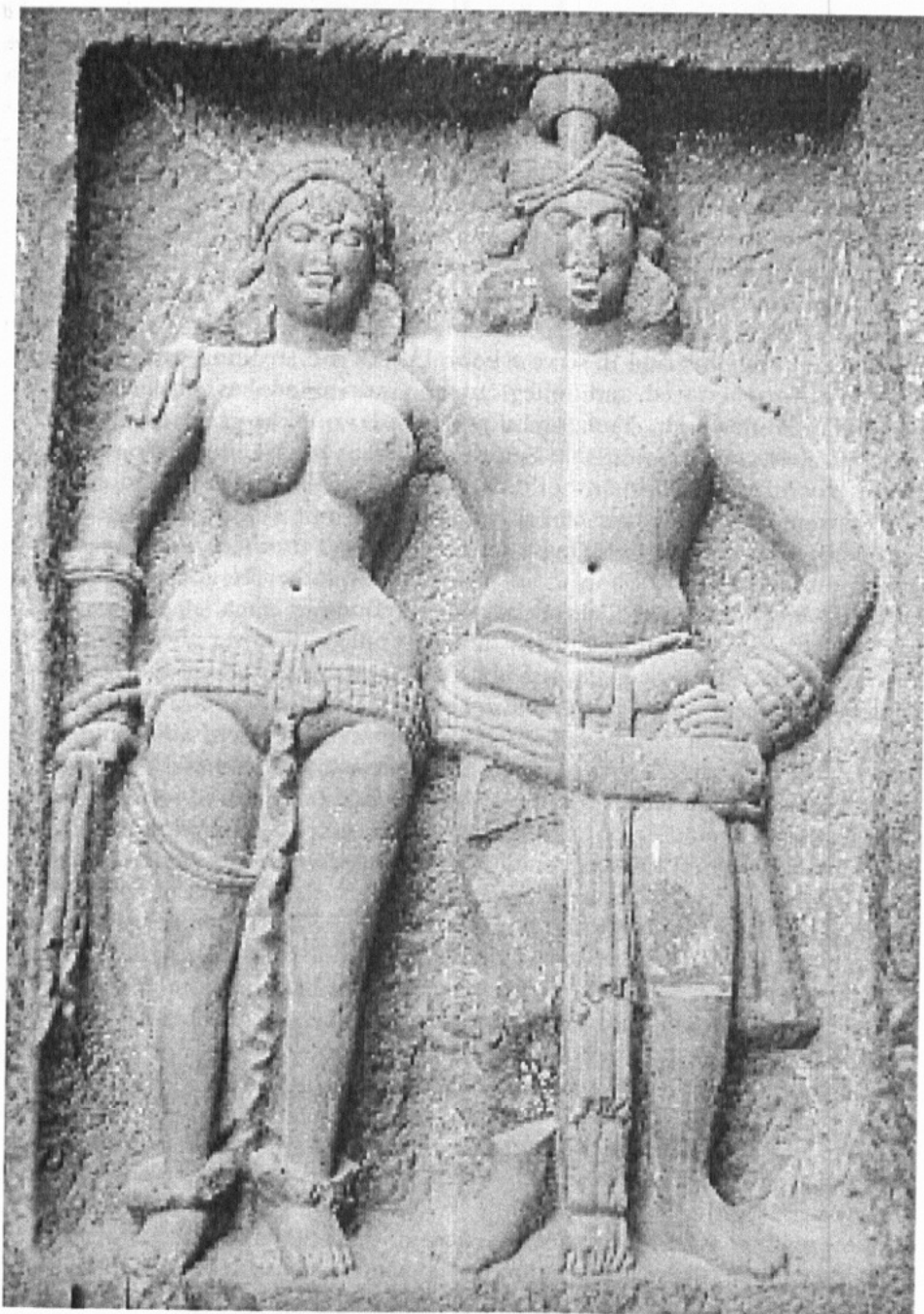
Yama was impressed by the courage and wisdom of this beautiful young woman. He replied, "Please stop following me. Your wise words and persistent devotion for your husband deserve a boon. Ask of me anything except that your husband's life be restored, and I will grant it." Savatri asked that her blind father-in-law be granted new sight. Yama said that her wish would be granted, and then he turned to leave only to find that Savatri was about to continue following. Yama again praised her devotion and offered a second, and then a third boon. Savatri told Yama of the misfortune of her father-in-law's lost kingdom and asked that Yama assist in ousting the evil king from Dyumatsena's throne. Yama agreed. Then Savatri utilized her third boon to ask that her own father be given one hundred sons to protect his royal line, and that too was granted by Yama.

Yama then set off in a southerly direction only to discover after a short while that Savatri still relentlessly followed him. Yama was amazed at the thoroughly self-giving attitude displayed by Savatri and agreed to grant one last boon if Savatri would promise to return home. Yama again stipulated that the bereaved wife could not ask for her husband's soul. Savatri agreed to the two conditions and said, "I only ask for myself one thing, and that is that I may be granted one hundred sons to continue Satyavan's royal family." Yama agreed only to realize, upon prompting from Savatri, that the only way Satyavan's line could be continued would be for him to be restored to life. Although he had been tricked by the wise and thoughtful Savatri, Yama laughed heartily and said, "So be it! Auspicious and chaste lady, your husband's soul is freed by me." Loosening his noose Yama permitted the soul of Satyavan to return to its earthly abode and Savatri ran without stopping back to the place where Satyavan had fallen asleep. Just as Savatri arrived at the place where her husband lay, he awoke saying, "Oh, I have slept into the night, why did you not waken me?"

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What are the main themes in the songs? How do the songs illustrate aspects of Buddhist teachings?
2. How do the Laws of Manu define womanhood and manhood?
3. What explains the male attitude toward women's sexuality in *Manu*?
4. Are Savatri's actions consistent with the Laws of *Manu*?
5. To what extent do you detect protest against the prevailing gender structures in the Buddhist songs and the story of Savatri?

GENDER IMAGERY IN INDIA



Mithuna at Karli, Western India, 2nd Century C.E.
(Borromeo/Art Resources, NY)

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to what extent can the study of art help us to understand how men and women related to one another in the past? The rich tradition of Buddhist and Hindu sculpture in India dating from the first millennium C.E. naturally provokes this tantalizing question. Of particular interest in this regard are the strongly sensual sculptures of loving couples known as *mithunas*. Symbolic of unity in Indian religions, *mithuna* couples have greeted worshippers at the entrances to Buddhist and Hindu temples for the past 2,000 years.

The amorous pair here is one of several that graces the façade of the large Buddhist cave temple dedicated around 100 C.E. at Karli, near Mumbai (formerly Bombay) in western India. Their fleshy bodies, revealing garments, and ornate jewelry recall an earlier tradition of Indian sculpture that featured statues of earth-spirits known as *yakshis* (females) and *yakshas* (males). Perhaps the open affection the figures demonstrate for each other and the rough equality suggested by their pose come from the same, ultimately Neolithic, tradition.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What aspects of the sculpture suggest equality between the two figures?
2. How does the suggestion of gender equality in the *mithuna* compare with other kinds of evidence regarding gender structures in India during the classical period?
3. What explains the sensuality in a work of art that decorates the entrance to a Buddhist temple? What does the *mithuna* have to do with Buddhist teachings?

ESSAY SUGGESTIONS

- A. Drawing on the materials in this chapter (including the *mithuna*), write an essay about the lives of women in India during the classical period. What generalizations about the lives of women do the sources permit you to make?
- B. Drawing on Chapter 10 on Ban Zhao, write an essay that compares and contrasts women's lives in classical China and classical India.